

Letter from Columbia University student Ranjani Srinivasan after fleeing the United States to Canada

Columbia PhD student Ranjani Srinivasan avoided being detained after her F-1 visa was revoked. In this letter, she explains how she feels.

My name is Ranjani Srinivasan. I was a 5th year PhD student at the Department of Urban Planning, GSAPP. I was also a TA in the Urban Studies Department at Barnard College.

Some of you might have heard about my case. For those who haven't, I would like to share the details.

On Wednesday night (March 5), my visa was revoked by the Department of State.

While I was examining the email on Thursday morning (March 6), I received a phone survey from a private number claiming to be a third party hired by CU to administer a student opinion survey on campus conditions. At some point during the survey the person revealed they knew my exact address. I didn't think much of it, then.

Instead, to figure out my visa status, I immediately began attempting to contact ISSO. Some of you might know that their emergency hotline only connects to public safety. After several hours of emailing both my department and ISSO, I was put in touch with the Director of Compliance, who assured me in writing that I am in legal status and could continue my work as a TA.

On Friday, (March 7), while on a Zoom call with an ISSO advisor who continues to reassure me that I was in legal status, ICE came knocking at my door without a warrant. If I had been alone I would have opened the door. My roommate, an American citizen, recognized the knock as that of law enforcement. Given the lack of warrant she refused to let them in and repeatedly asked them to identify themselves; something they refused to do.

Scared and anxious, I told the advisor, who was still on Zoom, that ICE was at my door. Initially she seemed frantic, calling upper administrators but in the end she seemed amused. ISSO handed me a list of lawyers I should contact and asked me to call public safety – who said they would merely file a report and I should continue to not open the door.

Once I realized CU would not help me, I left my house for a safer location the same day.

On Saturday evening at 6:20 pm (March 8) ICE came to my house again. They threatened to appear everyday until they were able to put me in removal proceedings. At this point I still had legal status and they still did not have a warrant. This was the same day Mahmoud Khalil was disappeared by ICE.

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(Page 2 of 2 — as originally published at www.aurdip.org)

Until this point I had imagined that I just had to wait it out and the University would intervene to protect me. I was still worrying about grading my students' assignments. I was wrong. On Sunday (March 9), ICE illegally terminated my SEVIS and Columbia arbitrarily de-enrolled me causing me to lose my legal status, worker status, and housing. This immediately made me vulnerable to detention. The Dean of Student Affairs at GSAPP, rather than helping me, entered my building hoping to confirm I was still at home and had received the letter. Until this point she has been sympathetic, although claiming that it 'seemed like ISSO and Columbia were not in control.' After my de-enrollment she cut all contact with me.

My lawyers told me I had roughly two choices at this point. I could leave or I could fight my illegal termination of status but at risk spending a substantial time in detention. Therefore, on Tuesday, (March 11), I made the difficult decision to leave the US for Canada. At this point I was quite sure the University was working closely with law enforcement. And I suspected the private survey I had been administered had been ICE trying to confirm my address.

Yet, ICE still had not realized I had vacated my home and left the country. On Thursday (March 13) my home was raided by DHS. The agents were surprised to find my empty room.

Just the next day (March 14), I was shockingly put on blast by a DHS tweet that falsely reported that I had self deported and leveled baseless allegations at me.

The reason why I am laying out this sequence of events is that it demonstrates not only the absolute power the Department of State has over F-1 visa holders and the few legal options before us, but also the extent to which Columbia has been cooperating with ICE, instead of protecting its students.

Second, innocence will not protect you. I was not in the country from August 2023 to April 2024. While I received a summons on April 30, 2024, the case was dismissed by the courts and I have faced no disciplinary charges. Apart from attending a handful of low-level protests and posting on social media, I have had little contact with events on campus. So there is no explanation why I was targeted. With the rapidly escalating situation, the criminalization of free speech, and eminent travel bans, what has happened to me can happen to you.

Therefore, we must exert maximum pressure on Columbia and other universities to protect international students from these arbitrary state actions. And we must fight for complete amnesty and reinstatement for those whom Columbia has sacrificed in the hope of reversing funding cuts.

Now is the time to come together and demand universities do the right thing.



—Ranjani Srinivasan

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